



ART REVIEW: Beauty by Avedon and Energy in Pollock Prints Paired at Guild Hall

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by Charles A. Riley II

While there is a great deal to recommend both of the shows featuring major artists currently on view at [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton—"Avedon's America" and "Jackson Pollock: The Graphic Works"—for this reviewer, the Pollock show is the stronger of the two. The Avedon photos, as one would expect, are super but familiar; the Pollock prints offered some valuable insights into the work of the notorious Abstract Expressionist.

The [Avedon](#) exhibition is a crowd pleaser, luring East End culture vultures with many of the subjects ranging from power figures and beauties to well-known troublemakers. For many viewers, the qualifying factor for Avedon is his fame, especially if one of a viewer's weekly pleasures has long been turning the pages of [The New Yorker](#) magazine. Under Tina Brown, who made him the first staff photographer at the magazine in 1992, Avedon became the bold new visual spine of the publication, which had been dominated by illustration, and at least 10 of the images on view at Guild Hall, although many times larger and under glass, are straight from the archives of his assignments.



"Blue Cloud (Larry) Wright, slaughterhouse worker, Omaha, Nebraska, August 10, 1979" by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Avedon, who died in Texas at 81 in 2004, was born in New York in 1923 and edited his high school (DeWitt Clinton in the Bronx) literary magazine with James Baldwin. He rose from freelancing in his 20s for [Harper's Bazaar](#), under the aegis of [Alexey Brodovitch](#), through the photo-journalistic stratosphere at Life, Look and [Condé Nast](#). At his death he was working on an epic project titled "Democracy," and this show is called "Avedon's America," reminders of those portrait cycles that focused on politics, specifically civil rights. As the Guild Hall website points out in the description of the exhibition, the photographer's work stands today "as a testament to his dedicated desire to understand the unifying beauty in diversity."



“Malcolm X, civil rights leader, New York, March 27, 1963” “China Machado, evening pajamas by Galitzine, London, January 1965” by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Without minimizing that background, I would add that I found this exhibition to be further proof (along with the much larger show of 180 works that Philippe de Montebello gave Avedon at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in 2002) that the fashion shoot is essentially his gestalt, even when the subject changes.



“China Machado, evening pajamas by Galitzine, London, January 1965” by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

For example, the dappled glints of studio lights upon the metallic panels of a dress that makes Donyale Luna, shot for Harper’s Bazaar in 1966, into an Ovidian figure is pure supermodel, even as the Guild Hall brochure considers it a statement on discrimination in the fashion industry. That line of thinking stems from Luna’s decision to move to Europe in 1965 in the wake of the public outcry over another Avedon shoot.



“Donyale Luna, dress by Paco Rabanne, New York, December 6, 1966” by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Even when a photo is not elaborately staged for Dior (*Dovima with Elephants*, one of the showstoppers) or [Calvin Klein](#), a sponsor of the show, the look is similar. Even those group portraits of the A lists in various fields, now the gatefold province of Annie Leibovitz, are groomed for fashion layouts. Consider, too, the way the famous image of the beekeeper, a shirtless bank employee named Ronald Fischer who sat covered in queen bee pheromone with thousands of bees, has been

echoed in several clothing ads.

Beyond pure portraiture and fashion photography, though, there is no dearth of psychological intrigue and interest in the implied narrative of Avedon's works, a narrative advanced beyond that contained in the individual works on view by the curation at Guild Hall. The stunning technical expertise and signature style is what hits the viewer first; the sensitivity of the artist's eye and deeper look into the character of his subjects is what sets this master apart.



"The Generals of the Daughters of the American Revolution, DAR Convention, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1963" by Richard Avedon. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.



"Santa Monica Beach #4, September 30, 1963" by Richard Avedon.
© The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Looking at the [Pollock](#) show, I found myself completely immersed in those scribbled, snaking lines flirting with chaos and—because these are prints of various kinds—abruptly cut off at the top, bottom and sides by the end of the plates, often in mid-flourish.

The etchings are the core of the show, and Charles Stuckey in a brief but solid essay outlines some of the circumstances under which they were made. In the fall of 1944, Pollock's friend [Reuben Kadish](#) took him to Atelier 17, which had been relocated from wartime Paris to the New School in the Village and then to 46 East 8th Street, right across the street from the apartment of Pollock and [Lee Krasner](#).

The master printmaker, Stanley William Hayter—who counted among his collaborators Kandinsky, Chagall, Miro and [Picasso](#)—took Pollock in hand as he was preparing his second solo show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in 1945, just when he moved out east to Springs. Stuckey writes that he finds them "overworked" but it is exactly that dark, secondary state feeling that attracts this reviewer.

Comparisons to Klee, [Rembrandt](#) and Picasso come easily when looking at the blurred track of the burin in the engraving and drypoint works on white Italia paper. These were made in 1944 but printed posthumously in 1967 by order of Lee Krasner, who brought the seven plates to Emiliano Sorini. Along with the wilder gestures of the screenprints, these are emblems of pure energy. The screenprints were also printed posthumously, in this case by Bernard Steffen under the supervision of Sanford McCoy and also authorized by Krasner, according to the single-sheet but highly

informative handout at the gallery.



“Untitled, CR1082 (P19)” by Jackson Pollock, c. 1944-45 (printed posthumously in 1967). Engraving and drypoint on white Italia paper, number 11/50 Sheet: 19 13/16 x 27 1/4 in. Image: 15 3/4 x 23 3/4 in. Courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York, and The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc.

For me, the most compelling detail in this show was in a modest horizontal intaglio print. It was a tiny detail, utterly uncharacteristic of Pollock’s celebrated spinning of arcs of ink or paint in endless lassoed curves upon curves. In the lower left corner of the print is a brief but unmistakably straight line, fine and secure, clearly drawn along an edge such as a ruler. What an anomaly in that inky free-for-all! It brought to mind two notebook-worthy quotes. The first, which has been attributed by some (like the author [Jonathan Crary](#)) to [Cézanne](#), is “There are no straight lines in nature.” Pollock, though, bragged, “I am nature.” Just for a moment, for this reviewer, the rope between these two huge thoughts was pulled taut in one slender stroke of black ink.

BASIC FACTS: “Avedon’s America” and “Jackson Pollock: The Graphic Works” are on view August 12 to October 9, 2017 at Guild Hall, 158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.guildhall.org

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